AN INTERVIEW WITH STACEY MCMATH ’04 ON SUPPORTING NEW YORK CITY ARTISTS

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Stacey McMath ’04 is working hard to support the artists of New York City. As director of Program Services at New York City Department of Cultural Affairs (DCLA), McMath helps to support organizations in arts and culture across all disciplines.

The DCLA is the largest cultural funding agency in the nation, and its Program Services Department provides $28 million in grant funding to 900 organizations every year. Organizations are funded through peer panel review process and receive money for specific projects.

A graduate of the Theatre Producing and Management, McMath is passionate about helping artists and arts organizations find a place in the city’s hectic and challenging landscape. During her undergraduate years at Barnard, she was active in the Theatre Department and the student theatre scene. But even while she had an interest in producing theatre, she also always wanted to assist fellow artists. “Seeds of what I was interested in where there even then,” said McMath, who co-founded the Columbia University Performing Arts League (CUPAL) as an undergraduate. As an umbrella organization, CUPAL facilitates discussion between groups regarding the Columbia University arts community as a whole, encourages the sharing of resources between groups, and serves as an advisory board to any newly-formed performing arts groups or special projects.

When she was wrapping up her work in the MFA program, she wrote a thesis that looked at four experimental theatres as case studies, examining their organizational structures and looking for practices that support companies with unorthodox methods of creation. “My thesis project was something that allowed me to figure out what I was interested in and really come to conclusions about an issue that I identified in the field,” McMath said. “It was a great starting place for me, not just because I met a lot of people and pestered and interviewed them, but also it helped me formalize outside of my coursework what I was interested in doing and learning more about.”

After graduation she consulted with theatre companies and independent artists who needed assistance putting up their work. Soon she began to think on a larger scale about how she could use her experience to benefit more people. “After a few stints working for founding artistic directors, I realized I wanted to work for lots and lots of people, not limited to one person or organization.”

McMath began working at the DCLA as a program officer in 2008. Since then she has been moving up the ranks, finally assuming the director position. “The ability for people to earn an income that will allow them to sustain life in NYC is getting more and more challenging,” she said. “Saturation of organizations seeking funding from the same sources, the challenges of the real estate market, student debt ... all of these things play into that difficulty as well. I think the big question we are facing is whether there is enough freedom for people to make the choices that need to be able make to pursue a life in arts.”

Hoping to help provide people with that freedom is part of the work McMath is doing at DCLA, and she believes her studies at Columbia has helped prepare her for this role. “The management program is very broad, so you get enough knowledge to look at orgs and theatre projects holistically,” she said. “When I look at a grant proposal, I know about marketing and union issues and real estate fundraising. I can see the whole plan and organization.”
She also felt the support she received from the faculty was extremely valuable. "Steven Chaikelson was really a mentor to me, and continues to be. Having someone who is really invested in your career and supports you in risk-taking is really important."

Despite supporting artists and organizations from all artistic disciplines, McMath is still very immersed in theatre. "Doing evaluations and site visits brings me to the theatre with an official hat on," she said. "I also teach at Barnard a class called New York Theatre. I take students to see shows, they write about the work, learn about how to talk about performance, lectures to help them understand contemporary landscape."

McMath grew up in Colorado, but has been in New York since 1997. She sees the Big Apple as unique place to live as an artist. "Very few cities have the kind of municipal investment in the arts," she said. "Our budget is roughly the same as the whole NEA budget. It’s a fertile place to be an artist, but also a difficult place to pay your rent."

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